



OAKLAND PARKS Coalition

2012 Community Report Card on the State of Maintenance in Oakland Parks



Oakland Parks Coalition Board of Directors

John Bliss	Nancy Karagaca	Barbara Schaaf
Dale Hagen	Susan Montauk	Mike Udkow
Lisa Hire	Margaret Pinter	Iris Winogron
Judy Johnson	Emily Rosenberg	Anne Woodell

Contact

Susan Montauk

oaklandparkscoalition@gmail.com

On the web

www.oaklandparkscoalition.org

OAKLAND PARKS Coalition

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Introduction

Oakland's evolution from an 1850's rural village to the expansive urban municipality it is today has not been without growing pains. But, historically, throughout the boom and bust years our leaders succeeded in growing, preserving and improving open space for the benefit of their citizens. We must ask ourselves today if we have been good custodians of the legacy they left us.

When Gertrude Stein wrote in 1937 that in Oakland there was "no there there" her remarks were widely misinterpreted to mean that Oakland lacked a soul, a core. We now know that was not what she meant. Upon Stein's return to her childhood home in 1935 (after a 45 year absence), in search of the Oakland she fondly remembered, she was moved to utter those famous words when she could no longer find her house, her school, her synagogue and her park. All the familiar trappings of the former pastoral setting were replaced by dozens of new homes. She described her childhood surroundings in her 1906 autobiographical novel, as a place where a child "could have all anybody could want of joyous sweating, of rain and wind, of hunting, of cows and dogs and horses, of chopping wood, of making hay, of dreaming, of lying in a hollow all warm with the sun shining while the wind was howling."¹

Stein's idyllic landscape changed even more dramatically following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake which precipitated an influx of refugees to the East Bay and a need for recreational venues. Lake Merritt, described by one visitor as "a small sheet of water, a favorite place for pleasure boats. surrounded with yards belonging to the beautiful private residences [and having] a very attractive and park-like effect"² was already a popular recreational area and in 1908 Mayor Mott cashed in on his popularity to pass an \$8 million bond which he used in part to purchase many new park sites. Among them were Bushrod, Mosswood and DeFremery. The Oakland Parks Department under Mott's administration also purchased the 68 acre Joaquin Miller estate, allowing the Miller family to live out their lives on the grounds. Mayor Davie's term saw the addition of considerable acreage to the fledgling park system. In 1917, the Dimond family sold their expansive property along the creek and in the canyon to the city. Under Davie's administration the City also purchased 300 acres of hills wilderness which, in the 1930s, became the foundation for our Regional Park system.

The depression brought hard times but in 1933 Mayor Fred Morcom planted the first rose bush in the municipal rose garden which was renamed Morcom Amphitheatre of Roses. The war brought industry in the form of shipbuilding and an influx of migrants from the south and the 50s experienced urban flight to the suburbs. Fast forward to the end of the turbulent 60s and we

¹ *The Making of Americans*, Gertrude Stein, 1906

² *Oakland, The Story of a City*, Beth Bagwell, Origin of Lake Merritt

find an expansive system of open space, parks, medians and landscaped areas, all managed by a cadre of over 180 park maintenance personnel.

For decades since then our park system has been nourished by a consistent infusion of capital for park improvements—play equipment, refurbished sports fields and recreation centers—by the creation of new parks and, for a golden while, by ample gardening staff to keep our parks clean and safe. Maintenance staffing levels have taken a nosedive since their heyday, from a high of 180 full-time employees in the late 1960s to 80 FTEs today. An illustrative example of the staffing downslide can be found in a 1999 City report³ about Lakeside Park. The report notes that staffing for the park declined by 70% since 1974 when there were 24 full time gardeners to tend the park, to just 7 in 1999. Today, 2012, there are only two full-time gardeners assigned to Lakeside Park.

Like other agencies in Oakland, after several years of severe staffing cutbacks, park maintenance is running on fumes. The biggest question is what will be the long-term effect on our open and landscaped areas if they receive only basic or, in some cases, no routine maintenance for prolonged periods of time. This report will shed some light on the current condition of our parks which are a vital part of the vast array of open space that the City is obligated to maintain. The report also makes recommendations on how to proceed when prospects for increasing staffing to satisfactory levels are bleak.

Love Your Parks Day Survey Results

Each fall, since 2006, OPC has conducted a survey of conditions at Oakland parks. Our surveyors are OPC park stewards and other volunteers. This year, our stewards surveyed their parks during the month of September and our volunteers assembled on October 6 to survey the remaining parks. 116 parks and plazas were surveyed.

The survey addresses park conditions in nine categories:

- Litter
- Picnic Areas
- Restrooms
- Hardscape, Furniture and Signage;
- Drainage and Irrigation systems
- Greenery
- Recreation Centers/Exterior
- Outdoor Sports Areas

³ October 12, 1999, *City of Oakland Council Agenda Report from Life Enrichment Agency re: Status of Lakeside Park Maintenance*. "Since 1974, authorized OPR staffing levels for landscape maintenance in Lakeside Park have declined over 70%, falling from 24 full-time positions in 1974, to 12 full-time positions in 1980-81, to 7 full-time positions today."

Survey Format

Surveyors rate each category question and give an overall rating for that category. For example, the first category on the questionnaire is Litter. There are three questions pertaining to litter:

1. LITTER

Rate this section overall (1 = BEST) ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐

- a. Are the grounds generally litter-free? ☐ yes ☐ ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ N/A
- b. Are trash receptacles available? ☐ yes ☐ ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ N/A
- c. Are trash receptacles emptied? ☐ yes ☐ ☐ partly ☐ no ☐ N/A

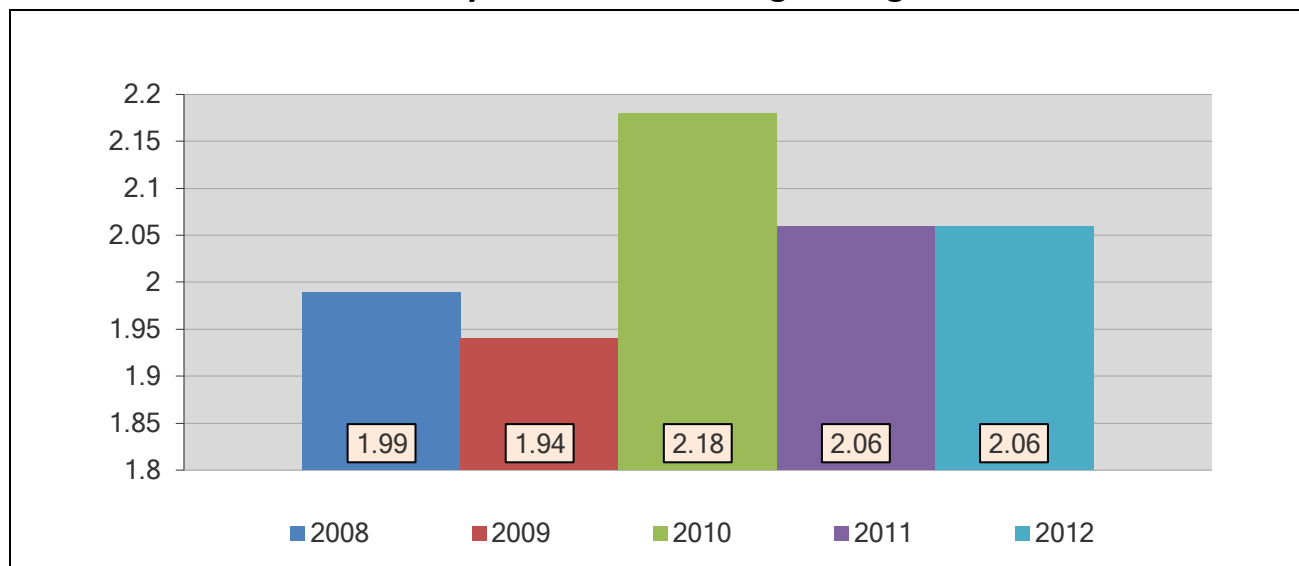
Overall Rating

At the end of the survey we ask surveyors to give the park an Overall Rating. We also encourage our surveyors to write comments for each category that will help to illustrate the conditions they have found.

*When reading charts in this report keep in mind that the higher ratings indicate the **most problems**. The lower ratings are the best.*

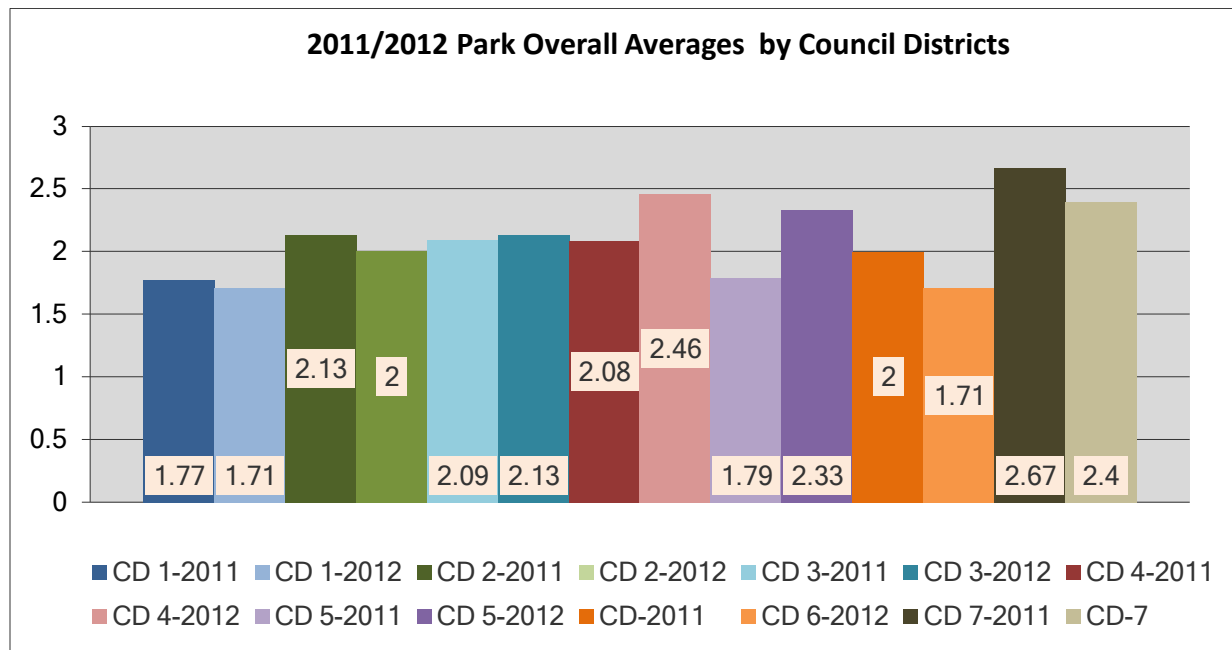
RATING RANGE:	BEST = 1→1.75	FAIR = 1.76→2.50	POOR= 2.51→3.25	WORST= 3.26→4.0
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Yearly Park Overall Rating Average



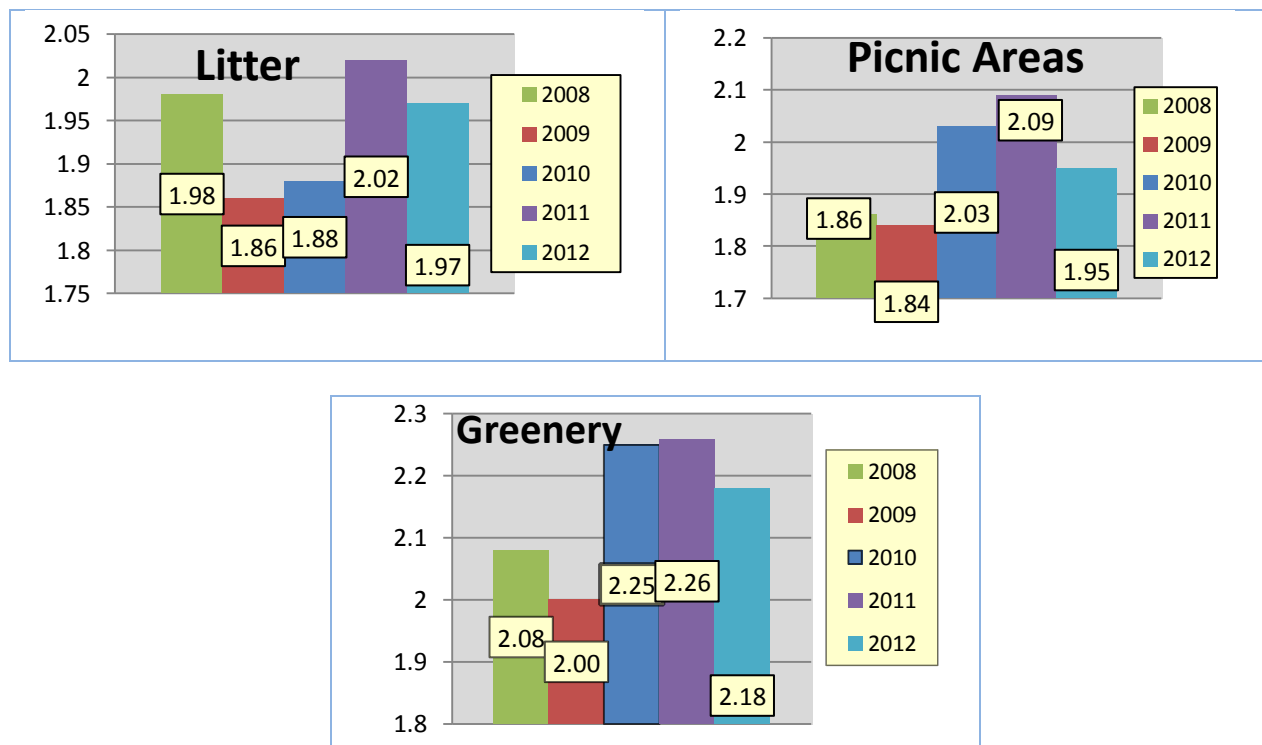
The Park Overall Rating Average of 2.06 for 2012 is identical to 2011 and both years' ratings were better than in 2010.

2011 and 2012 are paired by colors in the chart below. In 2012 Districts 1 and 6 received the best ratings with 1.71 and districts 4 and 7 came in last. 2012 conditions improved over 2011 in districts 1, 2, 6, and 7 and declined in districts 3, 4 & 5.

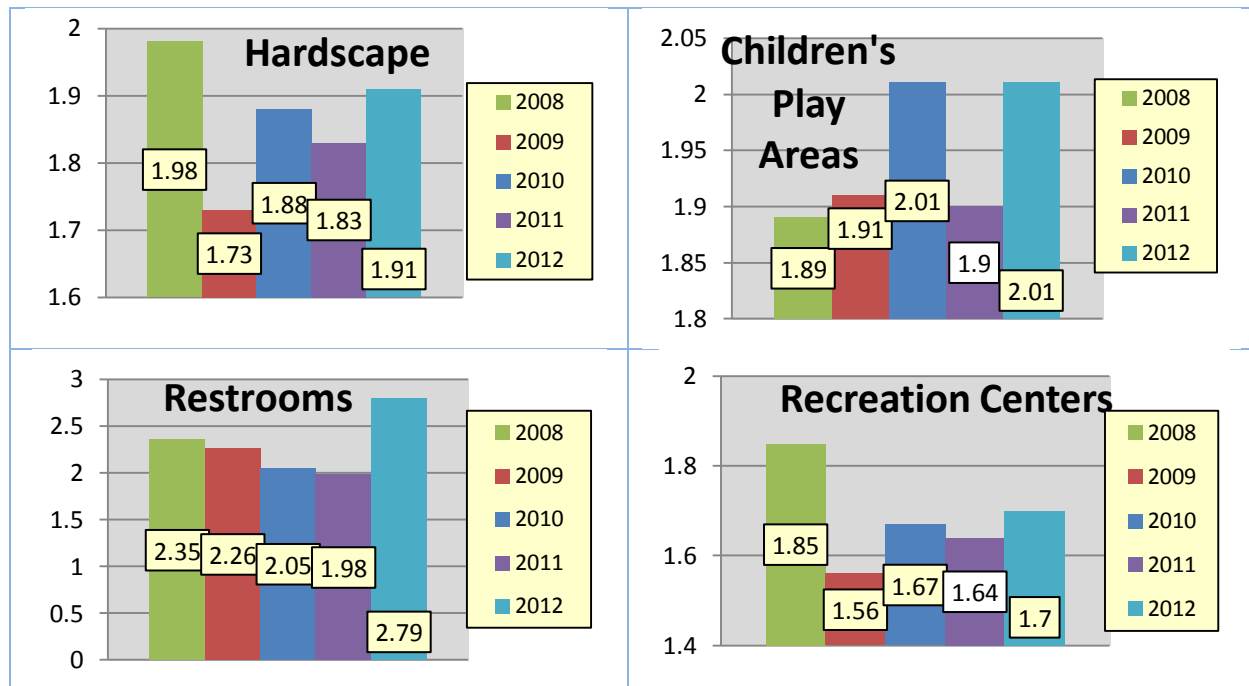


Rating Averages by Categories: Yearly Comparisons

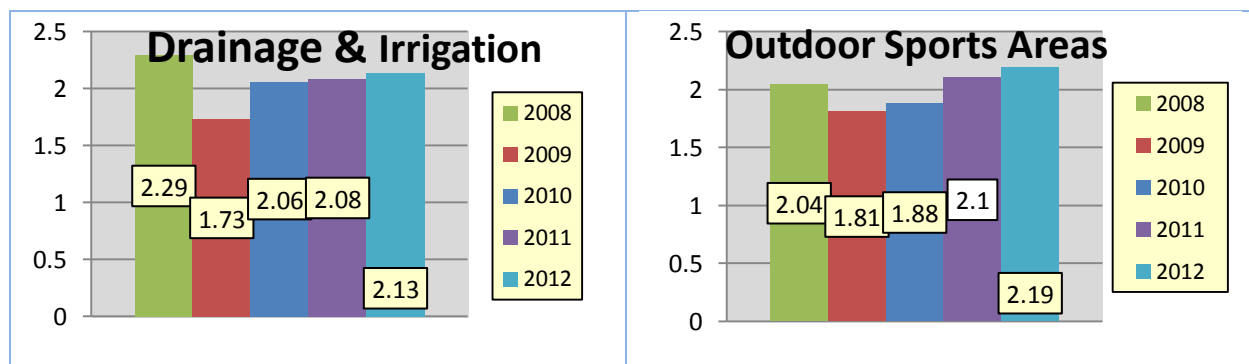
In the following charts we compared ratings in each of the nine survey categories for the past five years. **2012 Litter, Picnic Areas and Greenery ratings improved over 2011.**



Serious Decline: 2012 ratings for Hardscape, Children's Play Areas, Restrooms, and Rec Center Exteriors declined from 2011.



Declined slightly: Drainage & Irrigation and Outdoor Sports



Rating Averages by OSCAR Classifications

We use the parks classifications of the Open Space Conservation And Recreation [OSCAR] Element of the Oakland General Plan⁴.

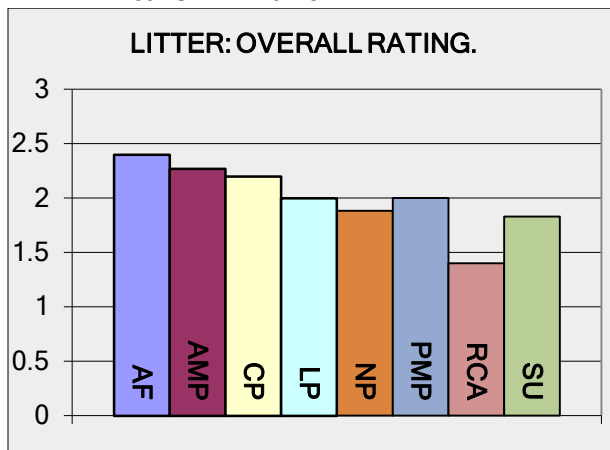
AF =Athletic Field	LP =Linear Park	RCA =Resource Conservation Area
AMP =Active Mini-Park	NP =Neighborhood Park	RSP =Regional Serving Park
CP =Community Park	PMP =Passive Mini-Park	SU =Special Use

⁴ The current OSCAR Element of the Oakland General Plan was revised and adopted by City Council in June, 1996. A complete description of each of the classifications can be found beginning on page 4-5, Table 8, of that document.

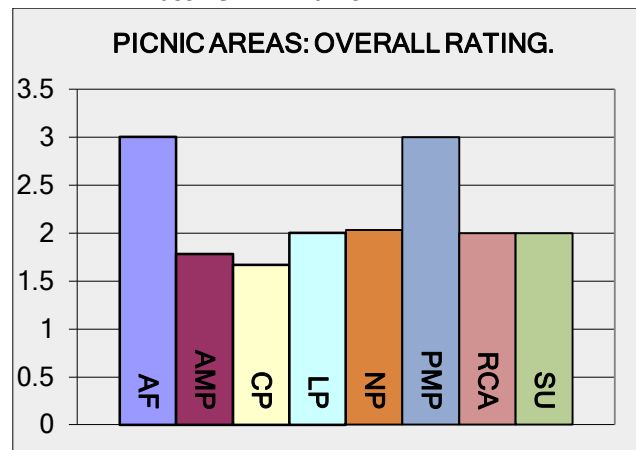
Two of our larger parks, Lakeside and Joaquin Miller, are designated as Regional Serving Parks but are too big for a single survey. For practical purposes, we have broken them up into components, each treated as a separate park entity and classified according to its use. For instance, the tot lot and Perry Field at Joaquin Miller have been combined into an entity we classified as a neighborhood park. Lakeside Park has been divided into eight sections and ratings were averaged for the whole.

In the following charts we grouped parks according to their classifications to compare them in each of the nine categories.

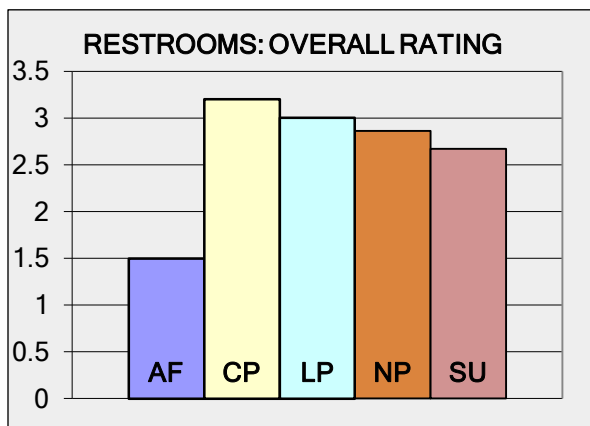
Litter Best Ratings: Resource Conservation Areas
Poorest Ratings: Athletic Fields and Active Mini Parks



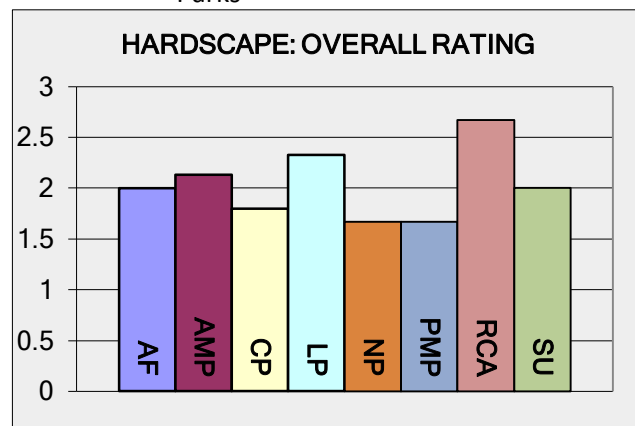
Picnic Areas Best Ratings: Community Parks and Active Mini-Parks
Poorest Ratings: Athletic Fields and Passive Mini Parks



Restrooms Best Ratings: Athletic Fields
Poorest Ratings: Community Parks & Linear Parks



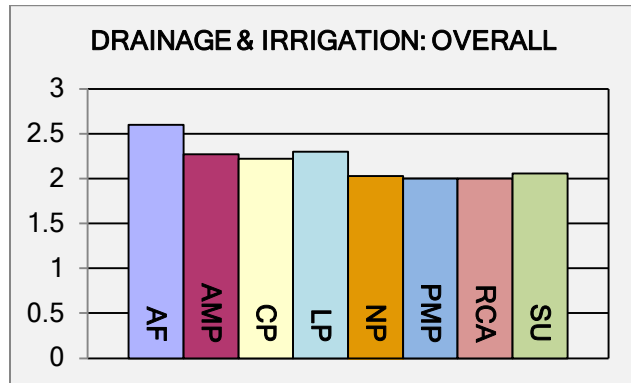
Hardscape Best Ratings: Neighborhood and Passive Mini Parks
Poorest Ratings: Resource Conservation Areas and Linear Parks



AF =Athletic Field	LP =Linear Park	RCA =Resource Conservation Area
AMP =Active Mini-Park	NP =Neighborhood Park	RSP =Regional Serving Park
CP =Community Park	PMP =Passive Mini-Park	SU =Special Use

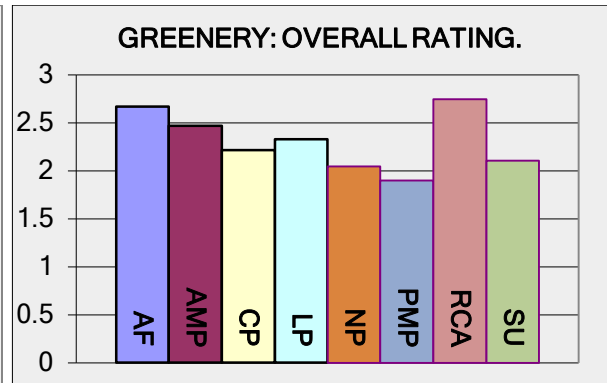
Drainage & Irrigation

Best Ratings: Passive Mini and Resource Conservation Areas
Poorest Ratings: Athletic Fields and Linear Parks



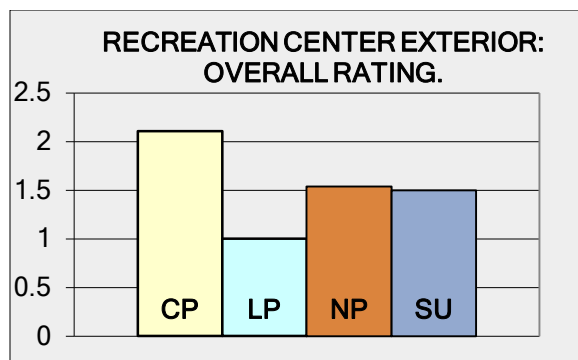
Greenery

Best Ratings: Passive Mini Parks and Neighborhood Parks
Poorest Ratings: Resource Conservation Areas & Athletic Fields



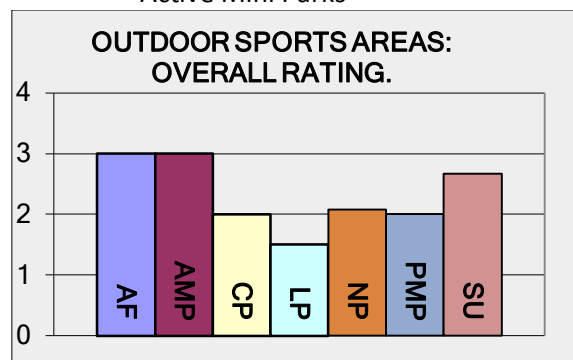
Recreation Centers

Best Ratings: Linear Parks
Poorest Ratings: Community Parks



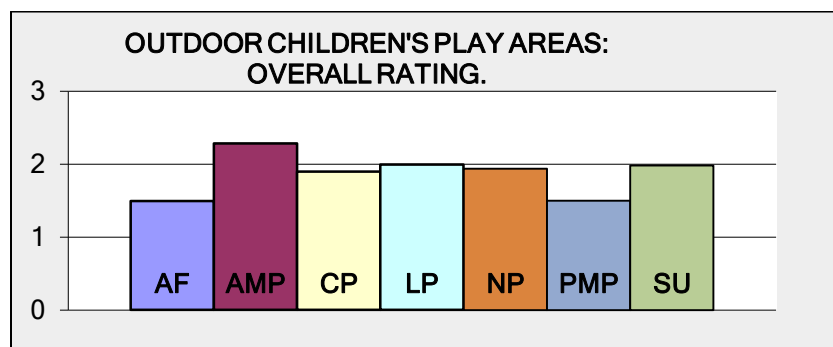
Outdoor Sports

Best Ratings: Linear Parks
Poorest Ratings: Athletic Fields and Active Mini Parks



Children's Play Areas

Best Ratings: Athletic Fields and Passive Mini-Parks
Poorest Ratings: Active Mini- Parks



Survey Conclusions

Comparing Conditions by Park Classifications

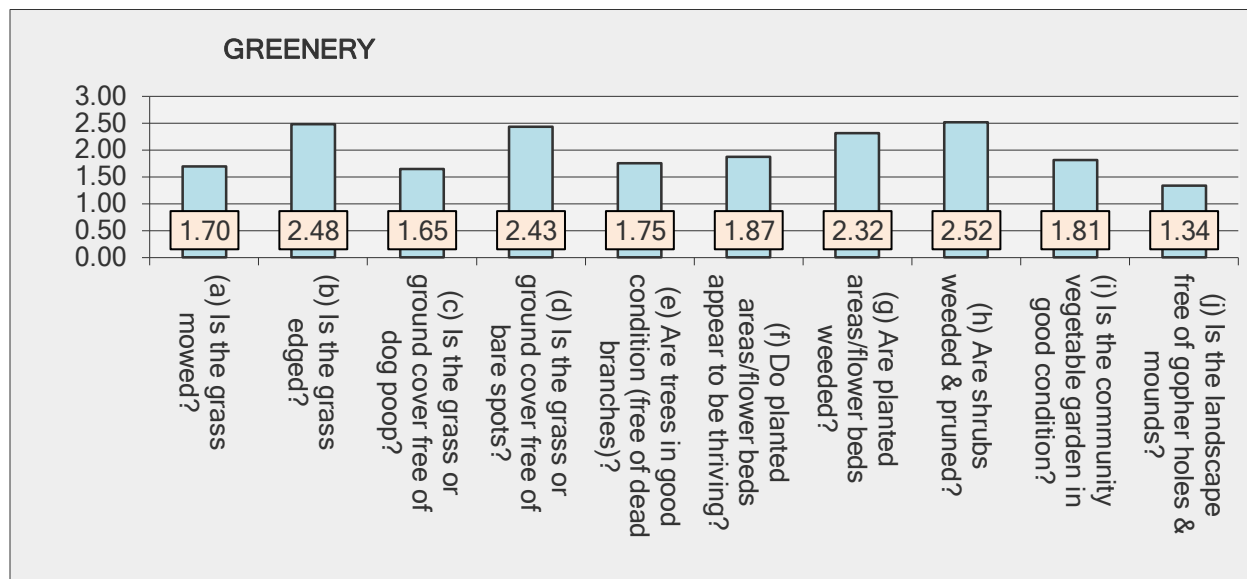
Athletic Fields were rated poor or poorest in six categories: *Litter, Picnic Areas, Drainage and Irrigation, Greenery, Outdoor Sports Areas* and *Outdoor Children's Play Areas*. This is understandable when we consider the constant use and traffic these fields during the spring and summer months when soccer, baseball and football leagues schedule their games. Oakland Parks and Recreation is besieged by leagues requesting reservations for playing time at these parks giving little time between games for fields to recover or receive proper maintenance. Artificial turf has proved its value at fields like Raimondi and San Antonio, bearing up under the pounding they take during the season. One has only to look at the grass-covered back soccer and baseball fields at Raimondi, which are pockmarked with gopher holes and bare spots, to recognize that the artificial turf can be counted upon to offer reliably good play conditions at all times. San Antonio was the first park to use artificial turf and is beginning to show its age (about 10 years) sporting depressions in front of each goal, but it is still very playable.



Comparing Conditions by Survey Categories

Our surveys indicate that litter, picnic areas and greenery ratings improved over 2011, not surprising since grass and litter became the primary focus of park maintenance after the midterm budget cycle correction in July, 2011. In response to yet another blow to its park maintenance budget, Public Works directors scrambled to adjust to the new constraints by laying off 10 gardeners (from 36 to 26) and increasing the part-time staff to compensate. They reasoned that the most indispensable maintenance services were litter collection and mowing and that using unskilled part-time staff to collect litter would reap savings. Mowing staff was minimally affected by the cutbacks and would continue on a routine basis, albeit with a slightly curtailed schedule.

The negative consequences of paring down the skilled gardening staff, however, can be seen in the ratings for other questions in the “Greenery” category that do not pertain to mowing.



The above chart shows rating averages for all of the greenery questions. All but one of the questions—[(j)gopher holes]-- reveals that every other aspect of park landscaping maintenance—pruning, edging, weeding, watering, community gardens, tree care—was given a poorer rating. In some parks gophers have so thoroughly invaded the park that the terrain is even dangerous to walk on. On sports fields riddled with gopher holes the danger to players is even more apparent.

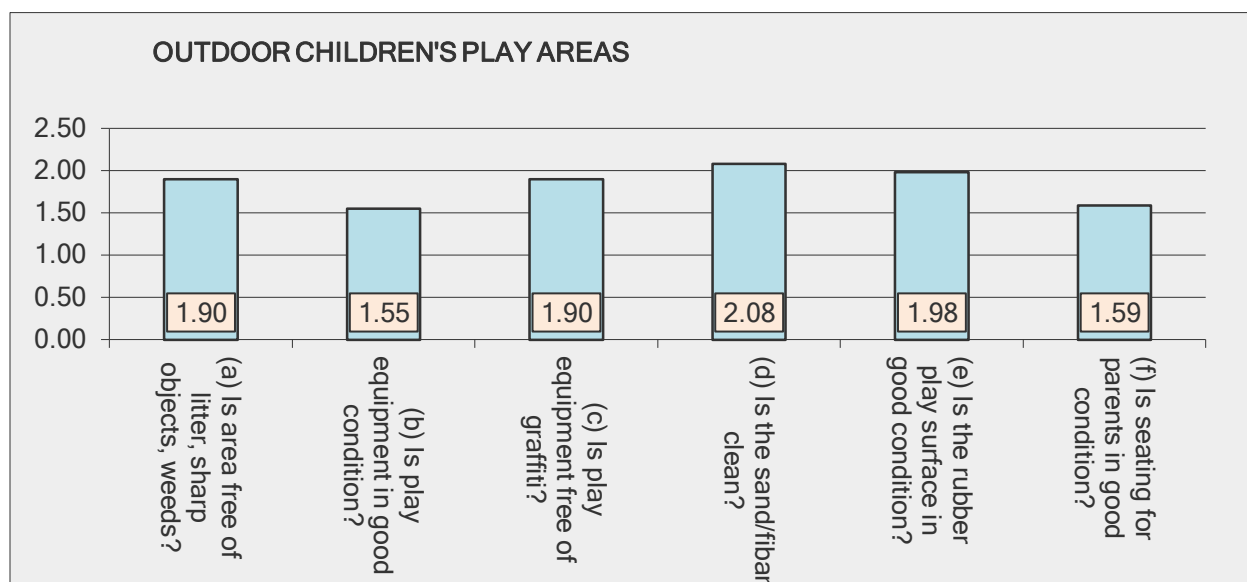


District 3: South Prescott Gopher Holes



District 4: Maxwell Park Weeds

Of the remaining survey categories,—*Restrooms, Hardscape, Drainage & Irrigation, Recreation Center Exteriors, Outdoor Sports Areas* and *Outdoor Children’s Play Areas*—children’s play areas and restrooms showed the most decline. The charts below show the ratings for each question in those two areas.



In *Outdoor Children's Play Areas* question (b), relating to equipment condition, received the best rating, no surprise since many grants have been won for new play equipment installations. All other questions pertaining to the upkeep of the play areas reveal a need for enhanced care.

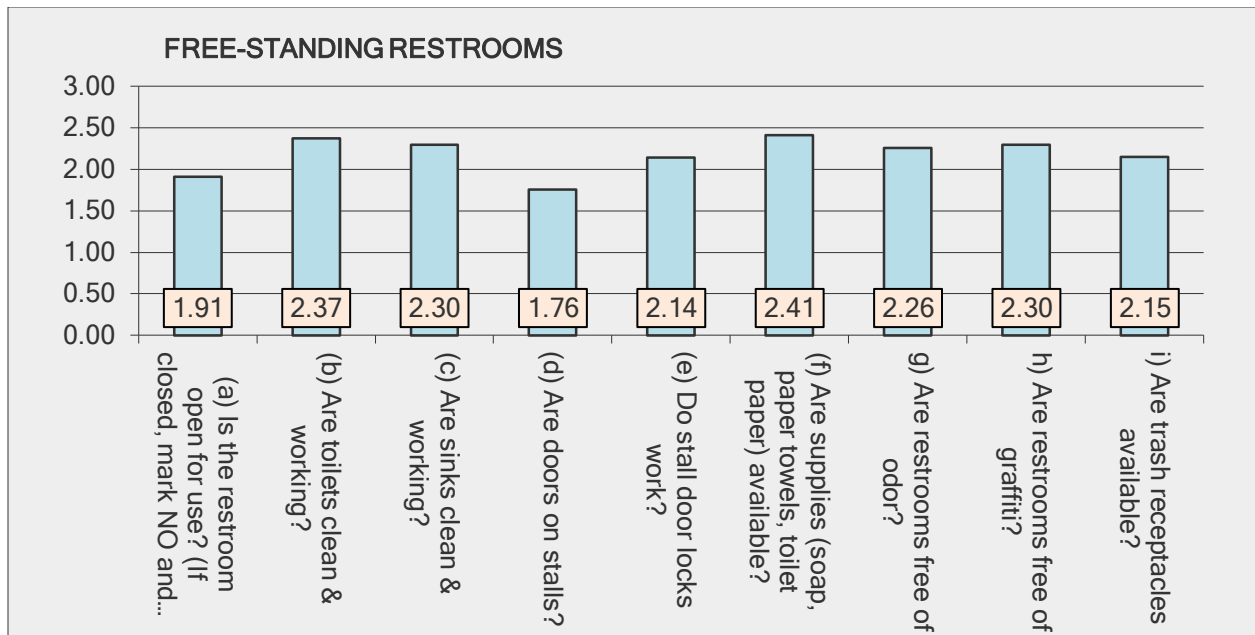
- (c) Graffiti is an ongoing problem at tot lots.
- (d) Cleaning of weeds and debris from sand surfaces is particularly labor-intensive.
- (e) The rubberized surfaces, which are ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compatible, are problematic because the rubber wears out quickly under the swings and slides, creating holes that invite accidents. Patching, which is very expensive, does not last long. The easiest to maintain and most cost-efficient surface to date is fibar (PWA has slated the sand tot lots to be replaced with fibar) but fibar is not ADA compatible.



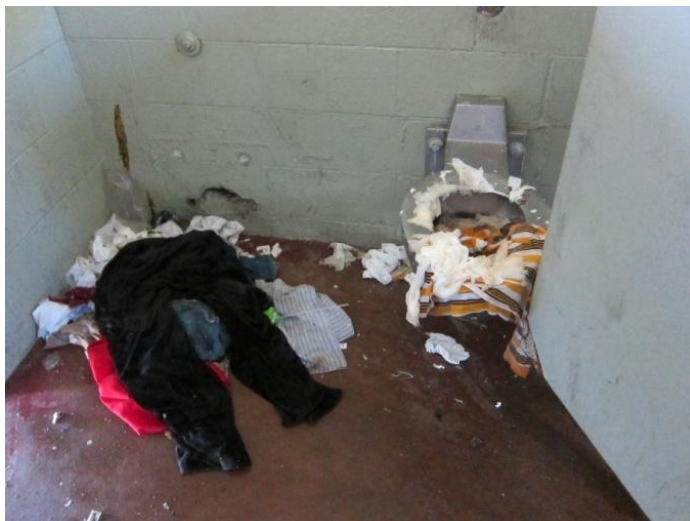
District 1: Redondo/Rockridge
Temescal Greenbelt



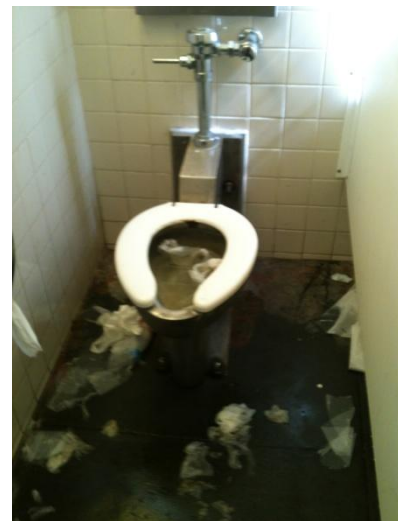
District 2: San Antonio



Restroom maintenance is a constant challenge because the free-standing facilities are frequently used for alternative purposes by homeless people and, in some cases, by groups of drug dealers that are using parks for business. Often it is the case that, no sooner are they cleaned, they are once again trashed.



District 7: Officer Willie Wilkins Park restroom stall



District 3: Eastshore Women's restroom

Park Maintenance Challenges

Getting Through Tough Times

Oakland's discretionary budget has been shrinking over the past decade but the last four years, since the sharp downturn in the economy, have seen a deeper decline than ever before.

Recently, PWA management has responded to budget cuts by reducing the numbers of skilled

gardeners and increasing the hiring of unskilled labor to compensate. Sacrificing skilled workers for more bodies is a questionable way of getting the work done, or, at least, of meeting a standard of care that the public deserves. The chart below shows the change in hiring practices since 2008 when the great recession began. Park attendant hiring doubled over the five year period while skilled gardeners were reduced by more than half. Tree related staffing was also halved in this same period and that department has had to shift gears from a preventative model of care to an emergency and complaint-driven one.

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-13
Total Gardeners (I, II, III)	57.5	48	36	36	26
Total Park Maintenance Supervisors	5	5	5	5	5
Total Park Attendants	14	11.9	23.2	23.2	25
Total Park Related	76.5	64.9	64.2	64.2	56
Total tree-related (Full time)	27	17	16	16	15
Total FTEs in field	120.5	93.9	91.2	91.2	80

Now, with only 26 gardeners and, approximately 25 unskilled Park Attendants, staff is organized into 19 crews, approximately 6 for each of the three geographical areas—North Oakland, West Oakland (includes Lakeside Park) and East Oakland. Skilled gardeners are usually assigned to the specialty parks—Neighborhood Parks, Community Parks--those with recreation centers. Some “crews” have only one person, the crew leader, depending on availability of Park Attendants on that the day. In addition to the 130 parks there is a long list of other areas these crews must cover: 45 landscaped areas around libraries and other public buildings, 10 plazas, 14 parking lots and 126 medians.

Staffing shortages dictate that priorities have to be reset: Park cleanliness, safety concerns, special events and complaints now drive maintenance and each comes with its own complications:

- Litter collection, before and after the weekend, takes the better part of two days a week and approximately 25% of maintenance hours.
- Many of the complaints to the Call Center are about the condition of medians. Median maintenance is a particular challenge since some medians can be scores of blocks long and the only time they will get a thorough grooming is when many crews are combined to work the entire day at a designated median. Spraying Roundup in medians is still controversial but it is the only way to efficiently control weeds. Yet, there is only one staff person licensed to teach the safe application of weed control products.
- Pruning in parks is dictated by safety concerns. Plants must be lifted up to create a line of sight and shelters of branches are removed to discourage homeless camps, modifications that are not necessarily good for the plants.

- Special events, which occur in great numbers at the big parks in the summer, take precedence over all else—crews are diverted from their regular jobs to clean up before and after these events.

Assistant Director Brooke Levin notes that our new assets are especially at risk because of the lack of full-time maintenance staff. Measure DD's extensive landscaping along Lake Merritt has dumped a considerable workload into the maintenance pool and has to be supported by squads of volunteers to stay viable. The same measure will, in the near future, create new landscaping on 12th Street and in Snow Park. Public Works will have to meet the ongoing challenge of additional acres to maintain by stretching its very thin resources to these and many other new assets and by increasing efficiency. Our hope is that this can be done without further sacrificing the institutional knowledge and talents that its skilled gardeners bring to the agency.

The Importance of Skills Training

A well-trained, experienced workforce and management are key to maintaining the health of Oakland's vast network of parks, medians and landscaped areas. Victoria Rocha has worked her way up from an internship that began nearly 30 years ago to her present position as PWA Supervisor for West Oakland. Her education, her training, the curiosity and passion she exhibits for horticulture make her a standout advocate for smart-gardening and an important asset to the PWA staff. In an interview in November she talked about her own training when she began her work as a gardener for the City in 1982. Her account underscores the stark differences between then and now.

I studied as an intern under a Master Gardener at Lakeside Park. We had a Mecca of horticulture here-- the flower and garden shows were started here--and it spawned that passion in people who were exposed to it. And that's what it takes to keep landscaping going—you have to have that passion and knowledge, the combination. I remember taking my crew leader test with guys, two of whom had degrees in botany or horticulture from universities. I think what happened is when they combined garbage collection with gardening you lost the passion, the love of the job. There are some staff today who have the high skills but they are few and far between. When you had a staff of 150 you would have 25 of those mentors. Now, with one-third the gardeners we had historically only a handful are that skilled and those are more quiet and shy about their talents than in the past. We don't have the flower and garden shows where they can show off their skills. My skills are in horticulture, and how to maintain a garden. Other crew leaders are wicked smart about equipment and bare-bone maintenance. The skills you have to have are so broad that no one's going to be good at the whole spectrum.

Today's education opportunities are off-campus. The City reimburses gardeners for courses they take to improve their skills but fewer of them take advantage of these opportunities than they did in the past. Ms. Rocha would like to see this change:

Gardening is a science and a skill that trade people don't understand. They tend to think of us as outdoor janitors. A good gardener is worth gold and if we change our job specs to require horticulture knowledge—it's in the works now with civil service—we'll get better results.

The Pros and Cons of Increasing the Part-Time Work Force

Nothr Oakland Park Supervisor Herman Miller values the part-time work force and encourages his gardeners to train them in all aspects of basic plant care. He ensures that they are trained to use the tools and equipment safely, that they can identify ground cover plants and weeds and do minor irrigation repairs. He reports that over 60% of the part-timers are returnees and some have been working for 10-14 years. They would love to move up to gardener positions but that will not be likely any time soon.

At the same time, as Supervisor Rocha explains, there is little time or incentive for skilled gardeners to mentor part-timers. She adds that gardeners may feel their jobs are threatened by the trend to increase the part-timers at the expense of gardener jobs. She is also concerned that part-timers may be doing jobs they are not properly trained for and causing damage to the landscaping, some of it irreversible.

Supervisor II Brian Carthan, is optimistic about part-timer opportunities for training:

If they are employed here for more than a season they learn how to string trim (weed-eater), mix the fuel, put in the edger blades and when they come to us the second season they have that knowledge. We had a group of 10 PTTs that started in September. The first two weeks they worked at the Rose Garden where they did a lot of weeding, basic pruning and equipment operation, basic gardening skills.

Taking all this into account, even if gardening positions are added back in at some point, laid-off gardeners will be offered those positions and advancement opportunities for part-timers appear to be very slim.

Programs that Work

PWA has unfailingly looked to new technology and best practices to improve efficiency, an effort that gains in importance when resources are limited. When CityWorks (an electronic data management & reporting program) was first introduced in 2009, hopes were high that it would make problem reporting and tracking easy for citizens, streamline record-keeping and produce valuable data. Three years later it is fully implemented and has fulfilled its promise. Now citizen reports of broken sprinkler heads, fallen tree branches, broken benches, situations that could be dangerous to park users are expedited to workers in the field. Assistant Director Levin is very satisfied with the system:

“It’s one of the best things we have done. You get problems into the system quickly, track them and resolve them.”

Its transparency—a work order can be followed on-line to its completion—and accessibility (SeeClickFix can be used with Smart Phones) has made citizen reporting a simpler task.

New Approaches to Litter Collection

Since litter pickup consumes, on average, 25% of maintenance hours emphasis has been placed on finding alternative methods to collect and dispose of garbage.

The first underground waste containers were installed in 2006 at Hardy Dog Park. These trash receptacles hold ten times the waste (300lbs) of standard above-ground containers and only have to be emptied every two-three weeks (compared to every day for above-ground containers) in the summer and less frequently in the winter months. Since the success of the pilot program, eight additional containers have been installed in all the dog parks and in Dimond Park, where scores of picnickers leave behind abundant waste throughout the summer season.

Another benefit of this disposal system is the avoidance of employee exposure to toxic waste. Plans are underway for the purchase of an additional hoist and four more containers are already on order. They will be installed at parks with heavy litter or parks that are particularly time-consuming to service, such as District 7 King Estates where trucks have to travel far into the park to empty a few cardboard containers.

OPC recommended the purchase of mini-compactors in its 2012 report. Three compactors, outfitted with radios and GPS systems, have recently been deployed and, with crews of two each, are making the rounds in all three maintenance areas. These small compactors will cut back on trips to the dump, shaving hours off litter detail and freeing up workers for other important tasks. We look forward to a report on the time-saving benefits they bring to litter collection.

The Role of Volunteerism in a Changing Landscape

Cities and states across the continent are increasingly relying on volunteers to help support park programs and upkeep and Oakland is no exception. Adopt-a-Spot, Keep Oakland Beautiful, Earthday, Creek-to-Bay Day are among the many publicly supported programs and events whose volunteers supplement the work that public employees do. Private and non-profit organizations, play their role too: Oakland Parks Coalition recruits Park Stewards to monitor and report problems in their parks and to organize clean-ups. Friends of Oakland Parks and Recreation raises money for capital improvements in our parks. And independent neighborhood groups conduct workdays at parks nearly every weekend. The work these organizations and individuals

perform, properly overseen, can be critical to achieving a standard of excellence in the park system.

These 2012 survey comments by three OPC Park Stewards could stand in for practically any park in Oakland lucky enough to have neighborhood support.

Council District 2/Oak Park: *Overall the park looks good compared to years past. A group of neighbors has made it a project under the Adopt-a-Spot program. This has generally improved the appearance of the landscaping in the park and improved visibility into the park, which at least partly deters loitering at night. Most graffiti and littering appear to occur at night at the picnic tables and benches near the children's play area. The litter usually gets picked up in a day or two, but putting a stop to the socializing after dark would help reduce littering and graffiti. Sealing the cracks and resurfacing the asphalt on the park [paths & court] would be a good idea because it would reduce water infiltration, which could lead to alligating of asphalt and a bigger repair job in the future. The basketball court is probably one of the most used features of the park.—Dennis Brown*

Council District 3/Cleveland Cascade: *Conditions have improved. Volunteers do all maintenance very well. irrigation is broken so all watering is done by hose or bucket. Considering the steep slope, no irrigation system, and heavy use, condition is acceptable.—Barbara Newcombe*

Council District 3/Lafayette: *Ongoing cleanup events help this site. It needs help due to homeless drug users who trash it regularly.—Ron Wolf*

Parks without dedicated volunteers or neighborhood involvement soon attract the wrong element, adding to their decay. Holly Park is a tot lot in East Oakland that has at times been a refuge for the homeless and for drug dealers. It is in need of a major cleanup but, more important, of the support of the neighborhood. Which should come first?

Council District 7: Holly Park

This sad-looking park does not appear to be used by the community. It was being used by the homeless last year. It does not look as though it has received any care in ages.—Surveyor



Volunteerism takes several forms in Oakland—occasional large workday events, routine neighborhood group-sponsored workdays and individual park stewardship. Neighborhood groups that are connected to a park and conduct periodic cleanups or green-ups are among the most successful types of volunteer service and there are many examples. To name a few: Friends

of Maxwell Park, Friends of Bella Vista, Dimond Park Neighbors, Lake Merritt Weed Warriors, Garber Park Stewards, San Pablo Corridor Coalition. These organizations are, for the most part, responsible stewards of their parks and have a proven record.

In addition to City-sponsored workdays—Earthday, Creek-to-Bay Day—organizations and businesses can organize their own workdays for large numbers of volunteers. KOB sponsored a Great America Cleanup, in April, 2012, at Verdese Carter and the Bancroft Median. It attracted over 500 volunteers. They built new planting boxes for the community garden at Verdese and cleaned litter from 20 blocks of the median along Bancroft. OPC's annual workday this year was held at South Prescott Park in Council District 3. Over 150 volunteers helped with a variety of tasks-- weed removal, pruning and planting jobs--that had been in abeyance for some time. But these workdays, which accomplished so much, were not planned and executed in a vacuum; they were done in partnership with Public Works.

Supervisor Brian Carthan had this perspective on workdays:

Workdays are of the greatest benefit because they make such an immediate positive impact on the area. The only drawback is the extensive planning that has to go into them but, since they are done, for the most part on weekends, they don't interfere with our routine maintenance.

Individuals who sign up with Adopt-a-Park or as OPC stewards are left, more or less, to their own devices after an initial meeting with supervisors at the park site. Many of these volunteers play an important role in cleaning litter or weeding and reporting problems to the Public Works Call Center. Others may require more supervision, especially when they take ownership of a park and want to personalize their parks with unauthorized plantings or prunings. This can present a conundrum for park supervisors who want to encourage and support volunteers but have to set boundaries.

OPC works to increase park volunteerism but volunteers need official City support and, unfortunately, that support is currently lacking. In our 2010 report we recommended that a position for a Park Volunteer Coordinator be established. That position was created with Jocelyn Combs at the helm in mid 2011. Ms. Combs reported a number of accomplishments in volunteer support, outreach, reporting and recruitment by the end of 2011. She retired from Public Works in September, 2012. Bryn Samuels, long-time coordinator of Adopt-a-Creek, also retired at about the same time, leaving the volunteer sector of Public Works struggling to function with acting coordinators who are doubling up on jobs. We know that the process of filling these jobs and, perhaps reorganizing the volunteer department, will take time and we can only hope that volunteers will hang in for the duration.

OPC Recommendations

HOLD THE LINE ON MAINTENANCE CUTBACKS

We're going to repeat ourselves and hope that we are heard. Maintenance staffing has been cut to the bone. Field workers are already discouraged by the work that they cannot accomplish. With a heavier workload injuries increase as do workers on sick-leave. **We urge City Council to hold the line on maintenance cutbacks and increase budgeting for additional gardening positions as soon as revenues turn the corner.**

Invest in an Additional Irrigation Specialist

Irrigation surface equipment is fragile. Sprinkler heads break frequently as people walk on them, especially when crowds gather at a park. Maintenance workers spend a good proportion of their work time identifying broken heads and replacing them but there are 50 maintenance personnel to repair the above ground equipment while there are only three irrigation specialists qualified to repair underground pipes and valves. And, when an underground system is broken the impact on the park can be severe and can result in irreversible damage. Too many of our parks show the ravages of broken irrigation—marshy surfaces, pooling water, and bare patches preclude enjoyable experiences in these parks. Our three irrigation specialists are swamped with a backlog of repairs. **An additional irrigation specialist position would be a wise investment.**

Fill the Position of Park Volunteer Coordinator ASAP

Our parks need volunteers and those volunteers need the support of City staff to do be useful. Without a volunteer coordinator it's like the Wild West out there, with anyone doing anything he or she dreams up for a park. Without guidance and boundaries, well-meaning volunteers will plant trees in parks and "weed out" good vegetation. Volunteers need good training and ongoing support to be of benefit to our system. OPC asked for this position to be created two years ago and **now it is asking again that Public Works fast-track the appointment of a new Adopt-a-Spot/Park Coordinator.**

The Gopher Invasion Must Be Addressed

Our surveys revealed a problem that has always existed but has mushroomed in the last year-- the gopher invasion of parks and playing fields throughout West Oakland. The photos below of gopher holes at Raimondi and DeFremery Parks will illustrate just how unsightly and dangerous this situation has become.

The front soccer field at Raimondi has an artificial turf surface and is in constant use but funding ran out and the back fields were surfaced with grass. Those are basically unplayable. The surface is pock-marked with gopher holes, making the footing precarious and actually dangerous. Defremery lawn is not used for play but it is blanketed with gopher holes, marring the beauty and jeopardizing the safety of this landmark park.

Raimondi Gopher Holes



DeFremery Gopher Holes



We have been told that PWA will contract with Alameda County vector program but the timeline is vague and the problem grows worse as time passes. **We urge Public Works to explore options for gopher elimination.**

Budget for New Equipment

In this ever-changing landscape of park maintenance there are two constants: mowing and litter pickup. We have seen how litter collection is being streamlined so we must now turn our attention to mowing. The disturbing fact is that the mowing equipment in use is over ten years old and, although it is being carefully maintained, its continued usefulness is in jeopardy if a solution is not soon found to the activity that wears the tractor mowers down the fastest--they have to be driven to the parks and they were not built to travel on asphalt. The mowers could still enjoy a long life if that trip is eliminated. This could be done with the purchase of a tilt-bed trailer to accommodate the John Deere and Toro mowers. **We recommend that funds for new equipment be identified at such a time that the budget allows.**



<http://www.deltatrailers.com/tiltbed.htm>

Conclusion

We must commend our gardeners, supervisors and part-timers for saving our parks from “going over the cliff” this year. Oakland is trying to stay afloat with limited resources in every department and this is putting a great strain on all City personnel. PWA management has given maintenance a grade of C this year. OPC concurs with this assessment and recognizes the hard work that went into maintaining this basic level of service to our parks, medians and all other landscaped spaces. We can only hope that better times and budgets lie ahead.